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THE STRATEGY OF LIDDELL HART AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR VICKSBURG

Core Course 5602 Essay

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The Strategy of Liddell Hart and the Campaign for Vicksburg

Armies of World War I fought battles using Jominian strategy and tactics. Frontal assaults which massed one army against the other and maintenance of lines of communication, preferably interior, were the choice of most generals. They believed the larger, better equipped army would always emerge victorious providing they were able to find or make and then attack a weak point in the enemy's line. However, the age of the rifle and rifled artillery had extended the distance between opposing armies and reduced frontal assaults to trench warfare and wars of attrition or even worse, led to massive casualties to both armies when one side left its trench to approach the other. This costly and ineffective strategy had been in use since the Napoleonic Wars. Leading with your chin was not efficient in boxing nor battle but it was supported by the writings of Clausewitz and Jomini and etched in the minds of military students and leaders for over a century. Were there not examples enough during the nineteenth century which demonstrated the cost of frontal assault? More important, were there examples of what would work better in this new age of warfare? There were some campaigns and battles where other tactics were successfully employed. The campaign for Vicksburg in the spring of 1863 was one such example. Analysis of this struggle may demonstrate the direction warfare could have taken before World War I.

Nearly all military theorists have suggested deception and maneuver in their discussions on strategy. Sun Tzu said:

“Warfare is the Way (Tao) of deception. Thus although you are capable, display incapability to them.
When committed to employing your forces, feign inactivity.
Display profits to entice them. Create disorder in their forces and take them.
If they are substantial, prepare for them; if they are strong, avoid them.

If they are rested, force them to exert themselves.
If they are united, cause them to be separated
Attack where they are unprepared
Go forth where they will not expect it.
These are the ways military strategists are victorious. They cannot be spoken of in advance ”¹

Clausewitz talks about the goals of maneuver and the impact of surprise but downplays their effectiveness saying there are “no rules for maneuver”² and “while the wish to achieve surprise is common surprise can rarely be outstandingly successful” contending that “the practice is often held up by friction ”³ He does not tie maneuver and surprise together into a strategy or tactic, perhaps because he believed that the confusion and psychological impact on the enemy might be less than the ‘fog and friction’ presented to the attacker in his attempt to control large armies in a rapid, deceptive maneuver Clausewitz emphasizes that “the best strategy is always to be very strong.”⁴

Jomini argued the benefit of a massed army at the decisive point, defining lines of operations complete with diagrams of the opposing forces squaring off against each other in classic frontal approach warfare He also discusses surprise and maneuver, but like Clausewitz, implies that carefully choosing one’s battle line, creating disruption and weakness in your opponent’s line and attacking that weakness is the key to victory. He emphasized tactics on the battlefield after two armies had approached each other rather than the strategy and tactics of the

¹ Sun Tzu, The Art of War, trans Ralph D Sawyer (Boulder CO Westview Press, 1994), 168

² Clausewitz, Carl Von. On War, ed and trans Michael Howard and Peter Paret. (Princeton, NJ Princeton University press, 1976), 542

³ Ibid., 198

⁴ Ibid., 204

approach to the battlefield.

In the 1920s and 1930s Liddell Hart defined the "indirect approach" strategy which is favored in modern day warfare. He emphasized deception and rapid maneuver throughout his book Strategy. His outline, the "Concentrated Essence of Strategy and Tactics" summarizes his philosophy. In the "positive" he suggested

- "1 Adjust your end to your means
- 2 Keep your object always in your mind, while adapting your plan to circumstances
- 3 Chose the line (or course) of least expectation.
- 4 Exploit the line of least resistance
- 5 Take a line of operation which offers alternate objectives.
- 6 Ensure that both plan and dispositions are flexible-adaptable to circumstances

Countering the frontal attack theory he argued "In the negative"

- 7 Do not throw your weight into a stroke whilst your opponent is on guard
- 8 Do not renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has once failed"⁵

He stressed that dislocation was the aim of strategy, that movement is what generates surprise and surprise gives impetus to movement. An unexpected move by one army upsets the enemy's disposition, dislocating the distribution and organization of his forces and perhaps more important, affects the thinking of the opposing leadership, giving the impression that he is at the disadvantage, unable to counter the enemy's move. He reminds us that "merely marching indirectly is not the indirect approach. He will change his front to meet yours unless you distract him from your true intention"⁶ and "effective surprise can only be attained by a subtle compound

⁵ Hart, B H Liddell, Strategy (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1991), 335

⁶ Ibid., 328

of many deceptive elements”⁷ He also said “To be practical, any plan must take account of the enemy’s power to frustrate it, the best chance of overcoming such obstruction is to have a plan that can be easily varied to fit the circumstance met” and “to ensure reaching an objective one should have alternate objectives” not only because it offers you more options but because the alternate possibilities will be noted by your enemy. Thus choosing a path with alternate objectives “is the most economic method of distraction”⁸ of your enemy This ‘indirect approach’ strategy could have worked in World War I and arguably would have saved thousands of lives and ended the war more quickly Had the American Civil War been analyzed more in the late nineteenth century, Hart’s strategy could have been developed from the failures of the frontal assault and the ‘indirect approach’ examples of General Ulysses S Grant Grant’s campaign for Vicksburg in 1863 follows Hart’s ideas so closely that it may have been the model from which he developed his strategic concepts The first seven of Hart’s eight condensed points of strategy were precisely followed by Grant

Most of the battles of the Civil War were waged using Jominian tactics and strategy Bull Run, Antietam, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg are examples of frontal assaults which resulted in marginal tactical victories and in casualties of 20,000 or more, usually evenly distributed on both sides of the battlefield Nearly all of the senior generals in the Civil War were West Point graduates They were taught the tactics of Napoleonic warfare by Dennis Hart Mahan, father of Alfred Thayer and a disciple of Jomini However, West Point Cadets did not study Jomini or Clausewitz’ writings directly or review strategy until after the Civil War Until 1862 all major

⁷ Ibid . 190

⁸ Ibid . 329-330

battles had been fought following the basic principles of massing one army against another in a line of battle, attempting to sever the opponents lines of communication while protecting ones own. Concentration of one army against a fraction of the opposing army was accomplished on the battlefield through flanking and heavy artillery bombardment, causing the enemy to reinforce one area while leaving other areas weak. Recognizing and attacking the weak area was the key to victory. This victory typically cost the attacker as many or more casualties than the loser and didn't result in the capture of the opposition's army. The victor was too weakened to press the attack after the initial victory and the loser retreated off the battlefield and regrouped for another day. This kind of war, similar to that of World War I, went on slowly killing off the male populations and weakening the will of both sides.

Grant initially chose to attack Vicksburg using frontal assault tactics. The Union forces were north of Vicksburg with the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers blocking approaches from all but the North and West. Those anticipated approaches were strongly fortified by the Confederates. Grant planned a two-prong approach with General William T. Sherman attacking from the west and his own force attacking from the north. Grant's approach was foiled by numerous attacks on his supply train, causing him to retreat back to Memphis. Sherman decided to attack without Grant since his army was twice that of LtGEN John Pemberton's Confederate defenders. He was soundly defeated by Pemberton's dug in forces who mowed down his Union soldiers long before they reached the Confederate lines, losing eighteen hundred men to Pemberton's two hundred. Sherman retreated to the north.

This failure apparently convinced Grant that the classic frontal approach resulted in greater losses than he could afford and probably would not be successful in capturing the naturally

defensible and heavily fortified city of Vicksburg. He formulated an alternate strategy for Vicksburg, the 'indirect approach'. He would not attack from the expected direction! Rather, he would attack from the southeast from within enemy territory. Between January and March 1863 Grant initiated five attempts to create a waterway around Vicksburg to the south, digging canals and exploring navigable bayous and small rivers. Though none of these endeavors was successful, they did keep Pemberton looking in several directions, making him realize he could not cover all of Grant's possible options. He had to guess at the most sensible and likely options which Grant might take and defend against them. Grant hoped he guessed wrong.

Giving up on canals and backwoods waterways, in March 1863 Grant formulated his plan. He decided to march his army down the west side of the Mississippi and have the Navy sneak its ships and transports south, past the Vicksburg artillery batteries, planning to use them to ferry his army across the Mississippi south of Vicksburg to support his attack from the southeast. This plan also offered him the options (Hart's 'alternate objectives' with a plan 'that can be easily varied') of moving further south to assist in the ongoing siege on Port Hudson or moving northeast to Jackson, another Confederate stronghold. The plan was risky because it depended on surprise, rapid and coordinated movement of more than 30,000 men and severing of his supply line once he crossed the Mississippi. He would need deception to effectively mask his intentions and to fraction Pemberton's and other Confederate forces.

Grant initiated five deceptive maneuvers (Hart's many 'deceptive elements') shortly before and during his southerly march. In early April, Grant sent Frederick Steele to attack Greenville, Mississippi, seventy-five miles north of Vicksburg, to destroy enemy supplies there and to convince Pemberton that the Union had given up on Vicksburg in favor of operations further

north. Several federal steamers were sent north for minor repair but contributed to the impression that the Union army and navy were moving north. Colonel Ben Grierson and seventeen hundred cavalry were sent on a raid from Tennessee through Mississippi and ending in Baton Rouge. He randomly sent small detachments off in various directions during his southeasterly movement, leaving the Confederates with the impression that the Union was everywhere. In addition to causing confusion and massive destruction of Confederate supply lines, Grierson kept several thousand of Pemberton's troops busy trying to catch him. Colonel Abel Streight's Cavalry attacked the supply line of General Braxton Bragg's forces in northern Alabama, the only other major Confederate army in the western theater. Though he was eventually captured, his raids also tied up many Confederate forces which might otherwise have been used to support Vicksburg's defense. Grant's final diversion consisted of leaving one third of his army north of Vicksburg with General Sherman while he marched the other two thirds down the west side of the Mississippi. Sherman made a feint against Snyder's Bluff north of Vicksburg simultaneous with Grant's forces crossing of the Mississippi south of Vicksburg. Pemberton's attention was drawn to Sherman, the closer of the threats, while he doubted the reports that Grant's forces were moving south. After completing the ruse, Sherman quickly moved south, crossed the Mississippi and caught up with Grant, taking part in the remainder of the campaign.

Grant continued to use deception after crossing the Mississippi to prevent Pemberton from determining which direction he was headed. Rather than taking the expected path toward Vicksburg, he picked Hart's 'line of least resistance' and 'line of least expectation', heading northeast to Raymond, Mississippi. This required abandoning his line of communications and living off the land before launching the final attack on Vicksburg from the east, a tactic not

previously used during the war and one which Sherman doubted would succeed. When Grant heard that General Johnston's Confederate forces had arrived in Jackson, further to the northeast, he changed his flexible plan 'to fit the circumstances' and marched on to Jackson to surprise and defeat the only nearby forces which might come to Pemberton's aid and prevent the possibility that he would be caught in a Confederate pincers action as he approached Vicksburg. Twice during the march toward Jackson Grant directed portions of his army to make short forays to the north to keep Pemberton guessing which direction he was going before heading back to the northeast toward Jackson. Grant used speed to add to Pemberton's confusion. By the time Pemberton received reports of Grant's movements from his scouts, Grant had changed direction again and moved off to a new location. Pemberton could not believe that Grant would abandon his line of communications and this, combined with the rapid movements reported, made him doubt the accuracy of any of his information. He deployed his forces in multiple directions, became confused over his priorities and was not ready when Grant's forces met his in battle. The effects of Grant's strategy were total confusion among the Confederates, fractioning of their forces and lack of preparedness, mentally and physically, for battle. They were in continuous retreat after Grant's victory at Jackson, avoiding capture only through the failure of one of Grant's generals to act when the opportunity for a full flanking movement and enclosure was presented in the deciding Battle of Champion Hill, allowing Pemberton's forces to retreat to Vicksburg for a final stand. Thinking that Pemberton's troops would be tired and demoralized, Grant twice attempted frontal assaults on Vicksburg, hoping to put a quick end to the campaign. Both attempts failed, resulting in large numbers of Union casualties, and Grant settled in for a siege. Perhaps this is the genesis of Hart's eighth and final condensed point of strategy.

concerning renewed attacks along the same line' Though the campaign ended in a six-week siege of Vicksburg, the victory was won before the siege began, as the defeat of the Confederates was inevitable once their forces and city were completely cut off from food, supplies and military rescue Grant had inflicted seventy-two hundred casualties at the cost of forty-three hundred and six weeks later captured Pemberton's 30,000 man force.

Through necessity, Grant shifted to warfare using the 'indirect approach'. The frontal assault resulted in too many losses and was leading the North into a war of attrition with the South He already understood what George C. Marshall would say 80 years later, "a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years War " Public opinion and political realities required a military strategy which would quickly end the war He devised and tested it in Vicksburg and made Sherman a believer The Vicksburg campaign and Sherman's campaign for Atlanta and March to the Sea effectively used deception, speed and maneuver to achieve victories which routed or captured the enemy with reduced Union losses These same principles were espoused by Hart after World War I and used very effectively during World War II, initially by the Germans and then by the Allied Forces It took a world war to convince army leaders that Sun Tzu's early principles, practiced and refined successfully by Grant, were superior to those preached by Jomini.

Ulysses S. Grant, one of the most innovative and successful generals of the nineteenth century, demonstrated the principles of the 'indirect approach', sixty years before Hart labeled Sun Tzu's principle and fifty years before World War I. The campaign for Vicksburg, Mississippi during the American Civil War should have been the pattern for warfare in all subsequent wars.

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